EOU

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seen a major shift in the momentum of the program.

Eastern is 30-11 on the year and 16-5 in conference play, just three games back of first-place Oregon Tech. The Mountaineers have 12 games remaining on the schedule, four of which are against the Hustlin' Owls. With the conference tournament and potential NAIA tournament appearance on the horizon, Eastern is within reach of the program's all-time single-season win mark of 41 set in 1999.

"We're putting ourselves in a great place to get to the CCC and possibly nationals, you never know how the rankings will play out," Christian said. "We're just playing it day-by-day in regards to the games we've got left and who we're facing."

Solid on the mound, balanced at bat

A big part of the Mountaineers' success has been the team's solid pitching staff, led by senior Amanda Smith.

Eastern's ace is currently 13-4 on the year, a win total that is second highest in the Cascade Collegiate Conference. Smith is fifth in the conference with a 1.82 ERA, fourth in opposing batting average at .197, third in innings thrown with 119, second in strikeouts with 100 and third with three saves. The senior was arguably at her best all season on Friday, April 1, against Warner Pacific, throwing a five-inning no-hitter.

On top of Smith's consistent outings in the pitcher's circle, Abby Giles and McKenna Stallings have totaled seven wins each. Giles ranks second in the conference with a 1.54 ERA and fifth in opposing batting average at .206. According to Christian, Giles has been a crucial player this year in being able to step in and provide composed innings during a bases-loaded jam or a difficult pitching situation.

Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Eastern's Taylor Dow (5) connects with a pitch during the second game of a doubleheader with Providence University on Friday, March 25, 2022, in La Grande. The Mountaineers swept the series.

"She has been our workhorse," Christian said. "Abby has just been that girl that goes in there with a stellar attitude and takes care of business. She's been our savior numerous times this year."

On the offensive side, Eastern has seen balanced plate production across its lineup. With no major standouts atop the conference individual stat rankings, the Mountaineers have entered games with the mentality that any player can step up when called upon.

"We're spread out and at any given moment one of our athletes can do damage," Christian said. "We love that with our program — we can look at our lineup and know that anyone can get it done."

Gaining momentum

The Mountaineers earned monumental victories in early April, defeating No. 5 College of Idaho in two consecutive games. The Mountaineers lost two home games to their rivals in late March, but bounced back to even the season series.

While Christian noted that the team takes the season one game at a time, the victory over a conference powerhouse had a positive impact on the team's morale and momentum.

"That series was huge," the coach said. "It definitely was a good testament. They have a great program with good pitching. Being able to go on the road and executive what we wanted to do was a great momentum builder."

Moving into the final segments of the regular season, Christian stated that the remaining schedule will be ideal for getting the team's players into the best form heading into the postseason. Eastern's final three series are all on weekends, allowing for recovery and practice during the weekdays as opposed to travel and competitions.

The Mountaineers are set to travel to Bellevue, Washington, to face Northwest in a four-game series beginning on April 15. Eastern will have a crucial four-game slate against top-ranked conference opponent Oregon Tech, before closing out the regular season with a four-game home series against Carroll.

"We've got our hands full these next three weeks, but we're just taking it one game at a time," Christian said. "We expect a battle every weekend in our conference."

BLAZERS

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down for the season, and the Blazers had decided that losing would be more beneficial than fighting for a berth into the play-in round.

Although this strategy might ultimately pay off, it doesn't mean Cronin always felt at ease with the path he chose.

"I still feel uncomfortable about it," he said. "We have a really competitive group. We didn't want to lose ball games. Sometimes it's necessary. Sometimes you have to go with your youth movement ... This, theoretically, is a really quick step backward. We're not looking at two, three, four years of this. So, that makes it easier. But as far as the discomfort, the willingness to accept losing, that was really hard for us and continues to be."

The path to simply becoming competitive again won't require much. After all, most of the crew that finished the season 2-21 will not be in the regular rotation next season.

Lillard is on the road to a full recovery and has already spoken about how much better his body feels after sitting out the last three months of the season. Josh Hart, Justise Winslow and Nassir Little established themselves as legitimate rotation pieces. Plus, Anfernee Simons and Jusuf Nurkic, at their best, had the Blazers winning games without Lillard before the All-Star break.

While Nurkic and Simons are not under contract for next season, the Blazers have prioritized re-signing both.

"He is the type of player that we definitely want to build around," Cronin said of Nurkic, who will be an unrestricted free agent.

Simons will become a restricted free agent, and although Cronin said he expects the guard to receive offers from other teams, the Blazers plan to be proactive in locking him in with a long-term extension.

"I like our talent base, we need more," Cronin said.

Adding impact players via free agency or trade has been an Achilles' heel for the franchise for decades, and something that dogged Neil Olshey, the team's former president of basketball operations.

It's one thing to have flexibility. It's another to recruit and sign players that will make a difference.

Billups and Cronin said that there is no firm strategy in place beyond simply getting into the room with prospective free agents, including Lillard in the recruiting process, and trying to convince prospects they could flourish in Portland.

"It's a generic plan where we're going to be a united group and we're going to be ourselves," Cronin said. "And we're going to be confident in that room."

Billups said he is confident that the Blazers can lure high-end talent — and the former NBA All-Star believes he can help make it happen.

"I know and I believe that a lot of players in the league want to play for somebody like me," he said. "I just believe that. A former player who understands the cadence of the NBA. Understands what's important in terms of playing, rest. A dude that's going to hold you accountable without being disrespectful towards you."

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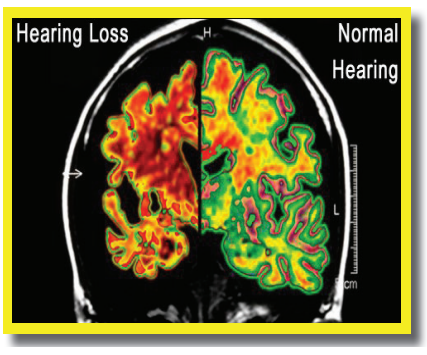

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